

STRUGGLING WITH AUTONOMY Voices of the West Bank and Gaza

BY MICHAEL TANNENBAUM



TEL AVIV

UNDER THE terms of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, one month from the date of ratification representatives of the two countries will begin negotiations on the issue of self-rule in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The talks promise to be long and difficult, for they will focus on the core of the Middle East conflict: the control of land coveted by both Palestinians and Jews. And even

if an agreement is achieved at the conference table on this initial step in the stipulated five-year transitional period to determine the ultimate status of these regions, its acceptance by the people who will be most directly affected remains a large question mark.

That, in any case, is the impression I got during a two-week trip through the West Bank and Gaza. The majority of the inhabitants, I found, are bewildered by the vagueness of the autonomy plan. Typical was the remark of the Arab proprietor of my hotel in Nablus: "I don't know if we're in the sea or on the shore." But an influential minority—the politicians and part of the educated class—are nearly unanimous in their repudiation of the plan. The more moderate among them seldom raise their voices—at least publicly—for two reasons.

The first concerns Jordan. Sparsely populated and economically dependent on outside aid, Jordan has leadership aspirations in the inter-Arab arena. It would, therefore, be placing itself in a highly precarious position if it backed a plan regarded as perfidious by most Arab states. Accordingly, King Hussein has turned his back on autonomy, and West Bank Palestinians—who still maintain Jordanian citizen-

ship—must tow his line. Failure to do so would incur many risks: loss of rights for exporting their goods and produce via the Jordan River's "open bridges"; cancellation of their Jordanian passports, making it impossible for them to travel; an end to the salaries Amman has been paying its former West-Bank civil servants for the last 11 years; and a cutoff of subsidies to the region's municipalities.

The second reason concerns the threat of assassination wielded by the Beirut-based Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Within a few months of Anwar Sadat's departure from Jerusalem, in November 1977, for example, three West Bank Palestinians were murdered—a clear signal to those thinking of defying the terrorist group's anti-Sadat stand. Following the Camp David talks last September, the PLO claimed on its radio broadcasts that it had killed two pro-Sadat politicians (but the men are still alive; the broadcasts were merely meant as a warning to them). And several persons who expressed interest in autonomy at the time it was first proposed were

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threatened by phone, with the result that they have since recanted or are keeping a low profile.

Still, the political situation in the West Bank is too fluid and complex to allow for a blanket conclusion that autonomy will never elicit indigenous support. Besides the "hardline nationalists," who back the PLO, a substantial number of "pragmatists" can also be found. The backbone of these "moderates" are the traditional West Bank notables whom Jordan once plied with government sinecures and economic opportunities. Their status hinges on a continuation of the Jordan connection, as does their wealth (they control much of the region's light industry). This has tempered their nationalism: Their goal is the same as that of the hardliners—*independence*—but they are willing to be flexible to reach it. Relatively silent so far, the pragmatists could—given a more favorable set of circumstances—have a significant impact on future developments.

A representative moderate is Zufar al-Masri, the vice-mayor of Nablus, who looks like a lanky business executive. His family—one of the town's wealthiest, with substantial investments in Amman—is firmly rooted in the pro-Hashemite camp (his brother served as speaker in Jordan's Parliament). Masri is not a proponent of autonomy. "Israel," he says, "is powerful enough to lead self-rule in any direction it chooses"—meaning away from Palestinian independence. "We don't trust the Israelis or their alleged good intentions," he continues, citing Jerusalem settlement policy (viewed by Palestinians as "creeping expansionism"). At the same time, he believes that self-rule will eventually be imposed. "No one here will actively back or adopt it," Masri says. "But if it is imposed, most of the pro-PLO mayors will run [for the proposed administrative council]. We have been talking amongst ourselves, and we may, too."

If all of this contradicts the conventional wisdom that the Palestinians will refuse to participate in autonomy, a pharmacist I spoke to in Nablus went

even further: "We want autonomy imposed," he said. "The Palestinians could then put on a show of protest for the benefit of the Arab states and win, without taint, the advantages of self-rule."

ANWAR AL-KHATIB, the former governor of East Jerusalem and Jordan's present de facto ambassador to Israel (after recent talks with Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, for instance, he drove for consultations to Amman), speaks in much the same vein. An admirer of Anwar Sadat, he has cautioned the Egyptian leader against harboring "illusions" about Israel's good faith. As for the United States, he trusts its intentions



KING HUSSEIN

but worries that for domestic reasons the Carter Administration will not pressure Israel into an ultimate withdrawal. On the other hand, he regards the PLO as merely another player in the game: "If an offer is made that we consider reasonable and the PLO does not, the West Bank will cast aside the PLO." Not surprisingly, the former governor's own favored solution is a West Bank-Gaza entity that would be federated with Jordan, in accord with the plan mapped out by King Hussein in his famous spring 1972 address.

Such a federation could quiet Israeli fears of the PLO, whom Jordan would be saddled with policing. Why Hussein wants the burden, though, is something of a mystery. True, before 1967 the West Bank provided a large part of his country's income, yet more than

once since then its anti-Hashemite outpourings have nearly brought down the regime. This has raised the question in Amman of whether it would be wise to reincorporate a "backyard-full of rattlesnakes"? Arabs with highly placed Jordanian contacts report that Hussein's chosen successor, his younger brother Hussan, answers in the negative—and is in general ill-disposed to Palestinians.

Just up the street from Khatib's East Jerusalem office are the editorial offices of *Al Quds*, the moderate and most widely read Arab daily in the occupied territories. The paper's chief writer is Ibrahim Duaybis, a schoolteacher before noon and a pragmatic Palestinian nationalist. To Duaybis' mind, the past 11 years of Palestinian-Israeli contacts and the marked increase in the West Bankers' standard of living have done little to reconcile the two nationalisms. More than 3,000 Palestinians, he points out, currently sit in Israeli jails for security offenses, and new fedayeen cells spring up almost as quickly as they are uncovered by Israel's security service, *Shin Bet*.

But Duaybis is also convinced autonomy will be imposed—with the Palestinians' active consent. As proof, he notes that in recent elections for the Jerusalem municipality, the Arab turnout was over double that of a few years ago—despite hardline nationalist agitation. Consequently, he sees the anti-autonomy demonstrations as mere dust raised by "the small minority who participate in politics here." The majority are silent, he contends, because they consider political action "dangerous and ineffective."

Partly for historical reasons, the situation one finds in Gaza is markedly different. The West Bank, having belonged to a nation hostile to Palestinian nationalism, has always been susceptible to every radical trend in the Arab world. By contrast Gaza, where the Arabs of southern Palestine took refuge, was administered until 1967 by an Egypt viewed as sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. In addition, the southerners are less educated and less politically sophisticated than their

northern compatriots. All of this, plus the fact that tradition and loyalty to the *hamulah* (extended family) continue here as social norms, has encouraged moderation.

Although political activity in the Strip is officially proscribed, two rival political organizations with deceptive sounding names function openly: the pro-Jordanian Benevolent Society, and the pro-PLO Red Crescent (usually thought of as the Moslem equivalent of the Red Cross).

The Society, controlled by the town's most distinguished son and its mayor, 69-year-old Rashid Shawa, dominates. Except for the period beginning with Gamal Abdel Nasser's takeover in Cairo, Shawa's family has held sway in the region for as long as anyone can remember, chiefly because of its wealth. His father, Haj Said, was southern Palestine's biggest landowner and had political ambitions for his five sons. This led him to send them to different universities around the Ottoman Middle East to cultivate useful friendships. But when the Nasserists entered the region, the aristocratic Shawas were shunted aside. A whole set of Gazans, mainly of the professional class and ideologically Leftist, were elevated to prestigious posts. It is these men who today steer the Red Crescent along its pro-PLO course.

AFTER THE 1967 War, Rashid Shawa established working relations with Israel, was installed as mayor, and began using his family contacts. One of these, with King Hussein, became grounded in mutual self-interest. Shawa needed Jordan as an outlet to the Arab world for Gazan (and his own) citrus; Hussein had his eye on Gaza as a potential seaport for his kingdom. Hence the two men saw the Strip as a part of some kind of Jordanian federation. The PLO did not. It began verbally attacking Shawa on radio broadcasts, finally forcing him to resign as mayor. Two attempts on his life were made shortly thereafter.

During the time he was out of power—he was reappointed in 1975—

Shawa strengthened his link with Amman by founding the Benevolent Society. Essentially Jordan's consulate on the Strip, it issues temporary Jordanian passports to Gazans otherwise confined to the region, and handles the import-and-export of goods and produce to and from Jordan and the Middle East as a whole.

Thus Shawa commands considerable influence for his Jordanian association alone. But the tall, thickset mayor is also a leader—perhaps the only real one in the occupied territories—and a skillful politician. He succeeds in maintaining a nationalist image despite close contacts with Israel



RASHID SHAWA

and Jordan, and has even managed to make peace with Yasir Arafat, whom he now consults when decisions need taking (neither man, of course, trusts the other). In short, what Rashid Shawa does—within certain limits he is well aware of—Gaza is likely to follow; and what he is doing today is trying to find an undogmatic solution to the Palestinian problem as a whole.

He was in Saudi Arabia, securing a \$10-million grant for the Strip, when the Camp David accords were signed. His subsequent consultations in Beirut with Arafat left him "depressed" at the PLO leader's "lack of constructive alternatives." In Amman, Jordanian officials advised him to follow in King

Hussein's tactical pro-PLO footsteps. This Shawa has done, albeit grudgingly. Close relations to the mayor describe his bind: Essentially well-disposed to the autonomy plan, he cannot announce his support without opening himself to PLO target practice and risking a break with Jordan.

But one relative told me that Shawa, along with other wealthy families, is working behind the scenes for Sadat through the Egyptian Embassy in Amman (ostensibly an important reason for Cairo's confidence that it has strong backing in Jordan). Public opinion in Gaza, this relative continued, is particularly malleable because of the population's social and educational backwardness. And while the pro-PLO Red Crescent may evoke public sympathy, it lacks real power: Most of the organization's members hail from small, uninfluential families. The Shawas, numbering 2,000 in the Strip, can mobilize 30,000-40,000 men at the drop of a pin, he claims, through contacts with other large families (who are represented on the mayor's municipal council). The Israelis, well enough aware of this fact and taking into account Shawa's political moderation, turn a blind eye to his less palatable activities, like his meetings with Arafat. No other mayor in the occupied territories has been similarly indulged.

My final visit in Gaza was with the highest Moslem official in the Strip, Sheikh Hazam Khuzandar. He, too, is a Sadat supporter, and he was recently the object of an abortive assassination attempt. The Israeli authorities consider the Sheikh a moderate; and on the basis of his public statements during the past decade and his current pro-Sadat stance, one would arrive at a similar conclusion. What, however, is a moderate? "I sometimes drive to Tel Aviv," the Sheikh told me, "to see my [former] land. What can I do? All of us want our lands back and we will get them even if it takes a thousand years. After we get back the West Bank and Gaza we will ask for the rest of our lands. We will ask and ask and ask; and when we get strong we will take back our lands."